

التباعد الاجتماعي بين طلاب الخدمة الاجتماعية المسلمين في الكويت، وبين طلاب الخدمة الاجتماعية الأمريكية من غير المسلمين: دراسة عبر-ثقافية

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ملخص الدراسة

هدفت هذه الدراسة الوصفية، عبر-الثقافية إلى قياس مستوى التباعد الاجتماعي بين عينة من الطلبة الكويتيين المسلمين نحو الأمريكيين من غير المسلمين، وبين عينة من الطلبة الأمريكيين نحو المسلمين. تكونت عينة الدراسة الغير عشوائية من مجموعة من طلاب البكالوريوس في الخدمة الاجتماعية بجامعة الكويت وطلاب بكالوريوس الخدمة الاجتماعية في جامعتين أمريكيتين. استخدم مقياس بوغاردوس للبعد الاجتماعي The Bogardus social distance scale (1959)، وتكونت العينة من 114 طالب كويتي و101 طالب أمريكي. وأظهرت النتائج أن معظم الطلاب في الدراسة كان لديهم مواقف إيجابية وليبرالية تجاه المجموعة الأخرى، حيث كان الطلاب من المجموعتين على استعداد للمشاركة في التواصل الاجتماعي بدرجات متفاوتة من التقارب مع أعضاء المجموعة الأخرى، إلا أن أفراد العينة الكويتية سجلت درجات أعلى من التنافر أو البعد الاجتماعي نحو الأمريكيين مقارنة بالدرجات المسجلة من الأمريكيين نحو المسلمين. وتبين أن تحليل تلك النتائج ضمن الأطر الثقافية لكلا المجموعتين تشير إلى أن البعد الاجتماعي لازال حاضراً خاصة في مستويات التواصل الأكثر حميمية كالزواج من أفراد المجموعة الأخرى. وتمت مناقشة هذه النتائج في السياق الثقافي، وتأثيرها على حقل تعليم وممارسة مهنة الخدمة الاجتماعية، كما خلصت الدراسة إلى تقديم رؤى لاتجاهات مقترحة للبحوث المستقبلية.

الكلمات الرئيسية: طلاب الخدمة الاجتماعية، الاتجاهات، التباعد الاجتماعي، المسلمين، الأمريكيين، مقياس بوغاردوس.

Social Distance between Muslim Kuwaiti Social Work Students and non-Muslim American Social Work Students: A Cross-Cultural Study

Abstract

This article reports on a cross-cultural study that investigates scores of social distance between Muslim Kuwaiti social work students toward non-Muslim Americans, and American social work students toward Muslims in two convenient samples. The Bogardus social distance scale (1959) was completed by 114 Kuwaiti students and 101 US students. Findings indicate that most of the students in the study had positive and liberal attitudes toward the Other group. Students were generally willing to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of the other group, with the American sample having less social distance toward Muslims than the Kuwaiti sample toward Americans. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the findings suggests that social distance still exist on the more intimate levels of contact. These findings are discussed within the cultural context, and implications for education and practice, and directions for future research are presented.

Keywords: Social work students; attitudes; social distance; Muslims; Americans, Bogardus scale.

Social Distance between Muslim Kuwaiti Social Work Students and non-Muslim American Social Work Students: A Cross-Cultural Study

Introduction

The possession and demonstration of positive and accepting attitudes toward individuals and groups of diverse cultures, religions, races, and ethnicities are the heart and soul of the social work profession. The National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) and Standards for Cultural Competence (NASW, 2001) do not prevaricate about social workers' attitudes when they are serving clients of cultural backgrounds different from their own. Competent social work practitioners make a lifelong commitment to the development of self-awareness, knowing that effectiveness in practice requires extensive knowledge of the attitudes, values, feelings, and experiences that combine to produce reactions (Cournoyer, 1991). Therefore, investigating issues of attitudes, prejudice, and social distance toward the "Other" –persons or groups of different attributes of ones' own- of future social workers is essential and integral objective of professional social work education and clinical practice.

In the current study, the researcher intended to assess the existence of social distance and factors that affect its magnitude in two diverse groups of social work students. The first group consists of Muslim social work students from Kuwait University and the second group consists of non-Muslim American social work students from two Western universities in the United States towards each other.

Background

Recent statistics about Kuwait's population issued by the Statistics Department at the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI, 2016) reported that Kuwait's total population at the end of December 2016 stood at 4411124. Of that figure, 1337693 were citizens while the remaining 3073431 were expatriates.

After the Gulf War of 1991, the number of US Americans living and working in Kuwait increased dramatically, both as military personnel and as civil workers. According to the report of the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI, 2016), Americans constitute the largest Western community in Kuwait (21034), followed by the British, and the third largest non-Kuwaiti group in the general population after the Arabs and the Asians. With these facts in one hand, and the long history of political and cultural disagreement between the Kuwaiti and American public opinions on many major topics, such as issues of human rights, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, capital punishment, polygamy, and abortion as examples on the other hand. These factors and more may have influenced members of both groups to adopt negative attitudes toward the other. Therefore, it is important to assess the current social distance between the two groups as the first step toward generating greater accepting attitudes, especially for social work students as future social service providers for all diverse residents both in Kuwait and in the US.

In the US, the Pew Research Center estimates that there were about 3.45 million Muslims of all ages living in the U.S. in 2017, and that Muslims made up about 1.1% of the total U.S. population and it is estimated that this share will double by 2050 (Mohamed, 2018). Furthermore, Muslim population is one of the fastest growing religious communities in the US, yet so far is little studied by researchers. A sharper interest in the media and government press releases into stereotyping of Muslims has come into focus since the World Trade Centre bombing in New York 2001. The media images of Muslims as a threat to the mainstream civic American life may influence to a certain degree the consciousness of both Muslim and non-Muslim Americans. With the continuous increase in the number of Muslims in the US, and the number of non-Muslim Americans in Kuwait, it is important to wonder how would members of each group be viewed and treated by social workers from the other group as receivers of different types of social services. The current study is a one step closer towards answering this question and preparing for the appropriate solutions in the future.

Literature Review

The previous studies of social work students' attitudes towards diverse groups were scarce and based on small convenience samples (e.g., Yuen & Pardek, 1998; Ben-David & Amit, 1999). The focus of these studies related mainly to people of color, women, and gay and lesbians (e.g., Camilleri & Ryan, 2006; Green, Keirnan-Stern, & Baskind, 2005; Sullivan, 1999), with the exception of few studies that investigated American and Australian attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims (e.g., Horsfall and Salih, 2003; Haque, 2001). Surprisingly, none of the Kuwaiti or Middle Eastern social work literature includes studies of social work students' attitudes toward ethnic, religious, or racial groups, and the rare existing research focused on assessing social work students' attitudes toward individuals with mental illness, and the elderly.

A study conducted by Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali (2003) examined changes in the beliefs and attitudes of 1500 Kuwaiti citizens two years after Western intervention during the Gulf War in 1994 and again in 1996 and 1998. The study focused on shifts in participants' views towards democracy as a form of government, and toward affinities with the West and Arab countries. The results reported that Kuwaitis became more supportive of a democratic model and that Kuwaitis felt friendlier to Western nations (e.g., England, U.S., and France) over time. This pattern of change was pervasive across structural categories of gender, religious sect, citizenship, residency and level of education. Results also demonstrated that Kuwaiti citizens value a democratic model that incorporates alliances specific to their history and location. In general, Kuwaitis increasingly appreciate Western nations, but also grow significantly more favorable to partnerships with their Gulf neighbors and solidarity with the Arab world (Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali, 2003).

In another study by Horsfalls and Salih (2003), students at a small, private southern university rated Middle Easterners with a social distance score of 2.04 on the Bogardus scale, meaning that they don't mind being friends with people from this group, but they do not want them as family members. On the other hand, students

were less approving of a person from the Middle East entering their country. A total of 19 students (27%) indicated that they do not want a Middle Eastern person to visit, work, study, or become a citizen in the US.

Furthermore, a study by Haque (2001) investigated attitudes of Australian high school students and teachers (N = 156) towards Muslims and Islam in two suburban high schools in southeastern Australia. The study found that the majority of respondents demonstrated positive attitudes towards Muslims and Islam, and strongly support the idea of multicultural coexistence in Australia. However, while 62.1% of students and 78.1% of teachers were "willing to accept a Muslim as a friend", 24.1% of students and 9.7% agreed with the statement of "Muslims should be prevented from migrating to Australia".

The Pew Global Attitudes Project (2016) conducted an attitudes survey in 13 countries, including the United States, from March 31-May 14, 2006. The survey included special oversamples of Muslim minorities living in Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain. The survey findings revealed that for the most part, Muslims feel more embittered toward the West and its people compared to the Western public. For example, solid majorities in France, Great Britain and the U.S. retain overall favorable opinions of Muslims and Arabs. On the other hand, a study by Kleg and Yamamoto (1998), found that one of the groups that Americans have the greatest social distance with and negative attitudes towards was people from the Middle East, along with 'Orientals' and African Americans.

In a study by Parrillo and Donoghue (2013), replicating the most recent study of social distance using the Bogardus social distance scale with its revised list of ethnic and racial groups, the authors analyzed a stratified random sample of 3,166 college students, making it the largest national social distance study ever conducted. The findings indicate an increase in the mean level of social distance toward all ethnic groups, as well as in the spread between the groups with the highest and lowest levels of social distance since 2001. Once again, Arabs and Muslims remained in similar ranks as in 2001, and were in the bottom two ranks in social distance. The social distance score for all 30 groups included in the study increased in general, with "Jews" (+.36) and "Muslims" (+.35) rising the most.

As indicated by existing literature, despite the deep attitudinal divide between Western and Muslim publics, the views of each toward the other are far from uniformly negative or positive. Moreover, studies of attitudes and social distance between Westerners and Muslims from the perspectives of social workers and/or social work students were dearth. Therefore, assessment of attitudinal changes between diverse groups and factors that may influence them constitutes great importance for the social work profession because of the profession's multicultural nature and core dedication toward human value, acceptance, and social justice.

The current study explores the levels of social distance, and investigates the possible associations between a variety of attributes to social distance in two diverse samples of social work students, Muslim Kuwaitis and non-Muslim Americans.

Research Questions

1. What is the overall social distance score of the Muslim Kuwaiti S.W. students sample towards non-Muslim Americans?
2. What is the overall social distance score of the non-Muslim American S.W. students sample towards Muslims?
3. Does social distance differ as a function of: gender, ethnicity, knowledge about the Other, and having a friend from the Other group for both samples?

Definitions of Key Terms

Social distance. Social distance defined as people's willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups (Wark & Galliher, 2007). The levels of closeness investigated here (through the application of the Bogardus social distance scale) are accepting members of the Other group: as a family member by marriage (considered an expression of lowest to no social distance), as close friend, as a neighbor, as a co-worker, as a citizen, as a visitor to the participant's country, and the greatest social distance where the participants agrees on excluding the "other" from their country.

Ethnicity. Ethnicity in this study has different definition for the two groups under investigation. It is for the American sample refers to the ethnic background of each such as African American, White, Asian, Latinos, Biracial, or other. However, because of the fact that in Kuwait there is no such variable as "ethnicity" in the culture, the term "nationality" considered the closest definition to ethnicity where people are defined by their citizenship such as Kuwaitis, citizens of the GCC countries (KSA, UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain), Arabs, biracial (when the father and the mother have different citizenships), and other. The demographic section of the survey defines each category clearly for participants of both groups.

The Other. To reduce unnecessary repetitions, the researcher will be using the term the Other (with capital O) to refer to the opposing group throughout the manuscript.

Social identity complexity theory in relation to social distance

In the current study, we examine aspects of the *social identity complexity*, which refers to the perceived overlap of the groups with which a person aligns him or herself (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). This construct is assessed by considering the overlap in the compositions of one's multiple ingroups.

Most of the time, individuals are surrounded by others who are similar to themselves (Kelley & Evans, 1995). We are first exposed to our family members who naturally belong to the same race, religion, and socioeconomic status as ourselves.

Children go to school with children who live in the same neighborhood, and consequently homogeneity of the immediate social environment is maintained, albeit to a lesser degree. The immediate social environment within which most people are socialized is objectively less complex than the society as a whole. Thus, the local social structure encourages the perception of relatively high similarity and overlap between ingroups, leading to a relatively simple social identity. This applied to both the Kuwaiti and American social workers. To develop a complex social identity, special conditions are necessary; conditions that enhance the simultaneous awareness of more than one ingroup and the awareness that these ingroups overlap only partially.

The most obvious factor that may affect social identity complexity is the actual complexity of the experienced social environment. Social environments in which different bases for ingroup-outgroup distinctions are crosscutting rather than convergent confront the individual with knowledge about the differences in meaning and composition of different social categorizations. Living in a multicultural society, for instance, may enhance awareness that social categorization based on ethnic heritage and social categorization based on national citizenship do not completely overlap and hence raises social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Another example of such experienced social environment could be the openness toward members from outgroups by educating ourselves about them and by engaging in personal or organizational relationships with individuals we consider the Others.

Methodology

Research Sample

The study sample consisted of two groups of participants. The first group was a convenient sample of undergraduate social work Muslim students from Kuwait University, recruited from nine classes of social work, and the second group was another convenient sample of non-Muslim American social work students recruited from two western universities in the US from four undergraduate classes.

Table 1: *Demographic characteristics of the two samples*

| <i>Characteristics</i> | <i>Kuwait sample</i> | <i>American sample</i> |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Mean age (years)</i> | 21.24 | 32.86 |
| <i>Gender</i> | F = 112 (98.2%) M = 2 (1.8%) | F = 87 (86.1%) M = 14 (13.9%) |
| <i>Ethnicity/Nationality</i> | Kuwaitis = 109 (95.6%) GCC = 2 (1.8%) Biracial = 3 (2.6%) | African American = 11 (10.9%) White = 32 (31.7%) Asian = 22 (21.8%) Latinos = 22 (21.8%) |

| | | |
|--|-------|--|
| | | Biracial = 11 (10.9) Other = 3 (3%) |
| <i>Took a course about the Other group</i> | 36.8% | 31.7% |
| <i>Know enough about the Other group</i> | 38.6% | 9.9% |
| <i>Have a friend from the Other group</i> | 24.6% | 62.4% |

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the two group samples. As to gender, the American sample had a smaller percentage of females (86.1%) compared to the Kuwaiti sample (98.2%), but in both groups females were the majority, and that reflects the rule rather than the exception in most social work student bodies globally. As for ethnicity, the American sample was more diverse, compared to the Kuwaiti sample that consists of a majority of Kuwaiti nationals (95.6%). In general, the Kuwaiti sample was younger ($M = 21.24$) than the American sample ($M = 32.86$).

As for the questions regarding the knowledge and interactions with the Other, similar percentages of both samples confirmed that participants took courses or course contents about the Other within their social work curriculum (KW= 36.8% & US= 31.7%). However, greater percentage of the KW sample believe that they "know enough" information about non-Muslim Americans than the US sample about Muslims (38.6% & 9.9% respectively). As for having a friend from the Other group, 62.4% of the US sample reported having a Muslim friend whereas 24.6% from the KW sample reported having an American friend.

Instruments

The study utilized the well-known Bogardus social distance scale created by Emory Bogardus (1959) to measure people's willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups. The scale consists of a list of statements, which represented varying degrees of social distance or social intimacy, and the job of the subjects is to agree to a statement of the list. It should be noted here that the scale was adapted to the social culture in Kuwait, and was tested by the researcher in a pilot study, which revealed no necessary modifications to be performed.

The Bogardus scale is still a commonly used method of measuring prejudice; published research using the scale has appeared in professional journals and conference papers as recently as 2013 (Parrillo and Donoghue, 2013). The scale asks people the extent to which they would be accepting of the "Other" group (a score of 1 is taken to indicate minimal social distance; scores of 2-7 indicate increasing social distance). The total scale yielded a satisfactory reliability of .60 for the Kuwaiti sample, and .62 for the American sample (Coefficient Cronbach's alpha).

A demographic survey developed by the author was used along with the Bogardus social distance scale to obtain basic information about the participants. Respondents were asked some basic demographic questions including gender, age, and their self-identified ethnic affiliation. In addition, participants were asked if they have ever taken a course about the Other group, if they would say that they know enough about the Other group, and if they have a friend from the Other group.

Research Design, Procedures & Data Analysis

The study utilizes a survey design intended to assess the social distance levels and report demographic data of participants. Data was collected from the two groups after granting the appropriate authorization and informed consent. In-class surveys were administered to the students of both groups following an explanation of the study's purpose and a discussion of its confidential, anonymous, and voluntary participation nature. The return rate was 100%. All data were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 software. Descriptive statistics and mean comparisons were applied.

Results

Subjects responses to the items of the Social Distance Sale

Table 2: *Subjects responses to the 7 items of the Social Distance*

| Statements | KW sample | | US sample | |
|--|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| | Yes % | No % | Yes % | No % |
| <i>Would you agree on having members from the Other group:</i> | | | | |
| 1. As a family member by marriage | 30.7 | 69.3 | 71.3 | 28.7 |
| 2. As a close friend | 63.2 | 36.8 | 97 | 3 |
| 3. As a neighbor | 87.7 | 12.3 | 98 | 2 |
| 4. As a co-worker | 88.6 | 11.4 | 98 | 2 |
| 5. As a citizen of your country | 58.8 | 41.2 | 97 | 3 |
| 6. As a visitor to your country | 90.4 | 9.6 | 96 | 4 |
| 7. Excluded from your country | 14.9 | 85.1 | 14.9 | 85.1 |

Table 2 shows the responses to the seven items of social distance scale that group one (the Kuwaiti sample-KW) gave to non-Muslim Americans, and group two (the American sample-US) to Muslims. The responses revealed that the least amount of consensus in the seven statements of the social distance scale resulted for the statement about intermarriage in both groups, yet the Kuwaiti group was undeniably less approving (KW = 30.7% vs. US = 71.3% agreed on statement 1: having members of the Other group as family member by marriage). Furthermore, with respect to desirability of having members of the Other group as citizens, the American group

rates of Muslims were significantly more acceptable than the Kuwaiti group of non-Muslim Americans (97% vs. 58.8% respectively). Similar results reported for the rest of the statements (statements 2, 3, 4, and 6) where participants from the US sample reported less disagreements with each statement compared to participants from the KW sample, which indicate that they did appear to have lower social distance and negative attitudes toward Muslims than KW sample toward non-Muslim Americans. Surprisingly, despite the variation in responses across the different items of the social distance scale between the two groups as shown in Table 2, both groups had the exact percentage of response score to item # 7, where 14.9% of participants from both groups agreed on having members of the Other group "excluded from their country".

To answer the first and second research questions, the overall social distance score of the Muslim Kuwaiti S.W. students sample towards non-Muslim Americans and the non-Muslim American S.W. students sample towards Muslims were calculated. On average, students from Kuwait University expressed social distance towards non-Muslim Americans with a social distance mean score of 2.24, meaning that they don't mind being friends with Americans, but they are reluctant to have them as family members by marriage. On the other hand, the American students scored 1.39 on average in social distance towards Muslims, meaning that they would feel comfortable to have Muslims as family members by marriage.

The relationships between social distance & social and demographic factors

To answer the third question of the study regarding the possible relationships between prejudice attitudes or social distance and factors like taking courses with content about the Other group, or being knowledgeable about the Other, or having friends from the Other group; the researcher conducted multiple mean comparisons (see Table 3).

Table 3: *Social distance Mean scores by different demographics and social factors*

| <i>Demographics</i> | <i>KW sample</i> | <i>US sample</i> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Gender</i> | Male= 1 | Male= 1.21 |
| | Female= 2.26 | Female=1.41 |
| <i>Ethnicity</i> | KW= 2.25 | African American= 1.55 |
| | GCC= 2.50 | White= 1.44 |
| | Other= 1.67 | Asian= 1.27 |
| | | Latinos= 1.59 |
| | | Mixed= 1 |
| | | Other= 1 |

| | | |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Took a course</i> | No= 2.22 Yes= 2.26 | No= 1.36 Yes= 1.44 |
| <i>Know enough</i> | No= 2.34 Yes= 2.07 | No= 1.41 Yes= 1.20 |
| <i>Having a friend From the Other group</i> | No= 2.49 Yes= 1.46 | No= 1.42 Yes= 1.37 |

In general, the researcher expected to find that the more the students know about the Other, the less likely they express social distance. However, the results shown in Table 3 exhibit only partial support for this assumption. In both groups, taking a course and being knowledgeable about the Other did not affect social distance scores in a significant manner. In fact, in both groups, participants who took a course with contents about the Other had slightly higher scores of social distance than participants who didn't. On the other hand, social distance scores were lower in both samples for participants who think they know enough about the Other group than the those who don't.

A noteworthy finding is related to the assumption of having a friend from the Other group. Within the KW sample, the social distance mean scores for participants who have a non-Muslim American friend were significantly lower than the other participants (1.46 vs. 2.49), the same findings applies to the US sample with smaller mean difference. As for the gender of participants and its relation to social distance, males from both groups reported less social distance compared to females, which means that males had more accepting attitudes and less prejudice toward the Other group in the current study samples.

When comparing means of social distance score related to ethnicity of participants (Table 3), in both samples, participants who identified themselves as having mixed or other ethnicity scored the lowest on social distance scale. Meaning, that participants of parents from two different ethnicities or nationalities have accepting attitudes towards members of the Other group to the degree that they feel comfortable enough to agree on intermarriage and to welcoming the Other as family member. This could be explained by the *social identity complexity* theory, which refers to the perceived overlap of the groups with which a person aligns him or herself (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Participants from mixed ethnicities according to the theory, identify themselves with more than one ingroup, and therefore develop a complex social identity that enhances the simultaneous awareness of the Other groups. As for the ethnic or nationality groups that had the highest mean scores of social distance, those were the citizens from the Gulf Council Countries (GCC) from the KW sample ($M = 2.50$), and Latinos ($M= 1.59$) from the US sample, followed by African Americans, Whites, and Asians respectively.

Discussion & Implications

Responses to some self-report measures of social distance and prejudice have been shown to correlate with measures of respondents' tendencies to provide socially desirable answers when both variables were assessed simultaneously (Green, et al., 2005). This type of response bias was a concern in the present study, because all the respondents were students of social work and they are assumingly committed to the profession's ethics; and the professional standards and Code of Ethics of social work are very clear about the nature and strength of nonjudgmental attitudinal expectations for professional social workers.

In an effort to limit the possible effect of such bias, the researcher applied specific procedures. First, the researcher made sure not to include any self-recognizing demographics of participants. Second, the researcher administered the survey in groups. Third, the researcher urged students to respond to the survey from a personal standpoint and not as what they think it was the right way to answer; and that was during personal contact of the researcher with each group of participants in both samples.

To the extent that social distance is a general measure of ethnic prejudice, the findings made two main contributions about prejudice between the two groups. First, both Kuwaiti and American social work students expressed positive and accepting attitudes toward the Other in general, especially when they had friendships with members of the Other group. The findings regarding the strong relationship between friendship and reduced social distance can not be attributed directly to the notion that contact with the Other reduces prejudice, because someone might argue that people with reduced prejudice seek out friends from the Other different groups and not the other way around. This issue would need to be disentangled with longitudinal analysis if we are to assume causality. However, we cannot rule out the repeated and well-documented assumption of the positive influence of friendship and personal contact on reduced social distance and improved acceptance between different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. In fact, this finding supports the theoretical assumption of the social identity complexity that having a diverse life experience with individuals from the outgroup can enhance the social identity complexity, decreases the distinction between the "we" versus "them" and social distance, and therefore increases tolerance and acceptance between individuals from the diverse identity groups.

Students' positive attitudes toward other diverse groups reveal that these students appear to adhere to the principles of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. Anti-oppressive practice suggests that these students have the ability to take into account their own attitudes and beliefs, and the range of different bases for oppression of groups and for inequality in society (Camilleri & Ryan, 2006; Thompson, 1993), which in turn allow for more effective account of client's issues and how social workers may begin to work with minority groups. Despite these encouraging results of students' attitudes, the finding of the limited focus of course content about the Other in both samples in one hand, and the negative correlation between "knowing more about the Other" and social distance scores in another hand suggest that more work is needed by social work educational programs in both countries of participants. Academics and social work educators need to evaluate the

existing curricula to ensure sufficient representation of various cultural groups and minorities, and encourage collaborative and ongoing research in the area of multicultural education. Emphasis must be placed on identifying positive contributions about other cultures, showing similarities and common grounds, and increase the awareness of existing stereotypes and prejudices. Once the nature of certain attitude is discovered, it is easier to change that attitude (Haque, 2001).

Furthermore, despite the evidence that prejudice and social distance is decreasing, the findings suggest that considerable social distance still exists mainly at the more intimate level like marriage. However, it should be noted here that for the Muslim Kuwaiti sample, the hesitation and refusal of the idea of intermarriage with non-Muslim Americans has its deeper roots in the Islamic religion beyond the personal interest and negative attitudes. For example, according to the teachings of Islam, Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men because in Muslim societies the children usually follow the father's name and religious affiliation. As for Muslim men, they are allowed according to Islam, to marry from either Muslim, Christian, or Jewish women, and not from women from any other groups of faith. Therefore, such intermarriage would weaken the Islamic society by the threat of losing a number of Muslims to other faith groups. For this reason, the majority of participants from Kuwait University responded negatively to the item of intermarriage, whereas Americans were bounded only by their own feelings and personal attitudes to respond without similar religious pressure. Although the previously discussed facts about the teachings of Islam in relation to marriage might not be new to most readers, the researcher is presenting a new argument that the Bogardus scale might not be the best tool to measure social distance when it comes to Muslims. Therefore, the continuous use of the Bogardus scale in measuring Muslims' social distance toward other diverse groups in Western research body might produce inaccurate and misleading findings that hinder professional efforts aiming at reducing social distance and nourishing acceptance and coexistence between people from diverse affiliations.

Another noteworthy cultural underpinning that may have a great influence on participants from the Kuwaiti sample is related to responses to item number five regarding the acceptance of members from the Other group as citizens. In Kuwait, the laws and regulations governing immigration and citizenship are very strict, limiting the possibilities of people from origins other than Kuwait to earn the right of citizenship no matter how long they live and work in Kuwait. Furthermore, earning the citizenship status entitles citizens to a wide range of services and privileges such as free health services, free education, low cost housing, a guaranteed job, and many more tax-free services. Therefore, obtaining citizenship status considered a privilege, and that may explain the low approval rate of responses to this item in the study by participants. However, in the US, similar laws and regulations are more lenient and responsive of individual humane cases, which make earning the right of citizenship more feasible and as simple as just being born in the States. In addition to the fact that having the citizenship status for Americans considered a chance to build a future in the land of the so-called American dreams, this dream usually comes with a high cost of taxes, mortgages, and other financial responsibilities. Therefore, respondents from the US sample were more approving on this item.

The current study findings of generally low social distance in both groups could reflect a tendency for those who choose social work as a field of study and work to bring more liberal attitudes compared to others (Camilleri & Ryan, 2006; Newman et al., 2002). Therefore, participants may have more accepting attitudes than the general public both in Kuwait and the United States, and therefore the findings of this study may not be generalized without further research on larger and representative samples of the public.

To the author's knowledge, this is the first cross-cultural study that estimates social distance/prejudice between Muslim Kuwaiti social work students towards non-Muslim Americans and non-Muslim American social work students towards Muslims in the social work literature. This gives the current study great importance, but at the same time, it is considered a limitation because of the absence of previous findings for comparisons and validation of conclusions.

To conclude, in order to decrease the degree of prejudice and social distance between Muslims and Americans, we have to take a closer critical look at what we are teaching in our schools, and assess the underlying messages of our curricula. It is also crucial to mobilize the media in both cultures to project factual images of the Other, and bring up similarities and common grounds between the two cultures to the surface rather than focusing on negativities and differences. Factual images could be discovered best by future research of larger samples and in-depth qualitative studies on both students and the public in both cultures. Because personal discussions of the researcher with participants in both groups revealed that participants' main source of knowledge about the Other was maintained by the media, Hollywood presentations, and mainstream individual opinions and not from reliable sources. Furthermore, we believe that developing a new measure of social distance that is culturally sensitive to the nature of Islam and Muslims is important. Finally, we are not suggesting that changing perceptions is easy, but it is definitely worth the effort.

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